A Conceptual Tool for Studying and Teaching about Race, Culture, and Context

Several critiques of the race-culture-context literature on educative experiences of groups within the stratified United States (U.S.) exist. Among them, O’Connor, Lewis, and Mueller (2007) highlighted the under-theorizing of race (e.g., race=culture); Guiterrez and Rogoff (2003) emphasized the restrictive conceptualization of culture; and Lee (2002, 2008) called attention to the absence of generative conceptual frameworks regarding both. In their critique of race-culture-context literature in relation to sociocultural perspectives, Nasir and Hand (2006) asserted that sociocultural theories offered frameworks to address critiques surrounding race, culture, and context in relation to education but lacked a consideration of power relations in the U.S. and a treatment of both micro-processes of local contexts and macrostructures of the wider encompassing milieu.

Without considering the micro-processes of local contexts; macrostructures of the wider U.S. society; the distinctiveness and relatedness of race and culture; and the corresponding influences of the aforementioned; policies, reforms, research, and practices that attempt to address the educational challenges of under-served and marginalized racial and ethnic groups in the U.S. will not result in substantive and sustainable outcomes. For this presentation, I introduce a tool that addresses the previously surmised critiques. The tool, appropriation of constructs from several different disciplines, provides a conceptual representation of race and culture as distinct but connected constructs; offers an analytical mechanism for disentangling their influences; and visually positions the micro- and macro such that connections are evident. In this presentation, I illustrate the utility of the tool in one example involving an African American middle school science teacher.
The Tool: Underlying Perspectives

James Wertsch (1998) begins his book, *Mind as action*, by discussing the fragmentation of disciplinary perspectives in the social sciences. He contends that each, similar to the three blind men and the elephant, offers a partial picture of a puzzle and this partial picture is disconnected from the pieces offered by other disciplinary perspectives. Some focus on the psychological, others on the cultural, and yet others on the institutional operating mostly under the antinomy of individual and society. Wertsch (1998) described his work on mediated action as “a way to live in the middle” (p.17). The model I propose is a similar attempt. I appropriate constructs from several different disciplines and situate them within a critical race theory framework. Critical race theory is one of the few frameworks in the education literature that explicitly accommodates race. I develop a gestalt that I contend is necessary in research and other initiatives involving under-served and marginalized racial and ethnic populations in the U.S.

Critical race theory, a framework that emerged from critical legal studies, is foundational to the tool I propose. In 1995, Ladson-Billings and Tate situated critical race theory in education. Critical race theory consists of several premises, two are central to the tool. In critical race theory racism, as a consequence of the country’s founding, is ingrained in the American consciousness and endemic in American life to the extent that it is normal (Delgado & Stefanic, 2001; Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Normal pertains to the regularity of racism’s function and presence—covert, overt, conscious, or unconscious—in the U. S. socio-political; the educational, economic, social, cultural, and political where power,
privilege, and capital (assets that only accumulate value) are operative in the distribution and
access to human, material, and symbolic resources. Because of the primacy of racism as an
assumption that underlies and permeates the tool, the first component conceptualizes race
particularly in relation to culture. The importance of historical and contextual analyses is the
second critical race theory premise that is pertinent to the tool. Consequently, the historical
connections to contemporary conditions within varying layers of context are explicitly captured
in the tool.

*Under-Theorizing of Race and Restrictive Conceptualization of Culture*

The use of race and culture in the literature has been summarized (Nasir & Hand, 2006;
O’Connor et al, 2007) but a conceptual view regarding their distinction and interrelatedness
remains lacking. The dearth of such a conceptual representation is problematic for adequately
examining and addressing influences involved in the educational challenges facing under-served
and marginalized U.S. racial and ethnic groups. For example, the resistance many teacher
educators face in their attempts to prepare culturally receptive pedagogues (Gay & Kirkland,
2003; Ladson-Billings, 2000) for teaching African American students and the difficulties
associated with mentoring graduate students with respect to researcher positionality (Milner IV,
2007) are intensified by the convolution of race and culture; cultural remedies are often
entertained in situations in which racial influences are the culprit. The first aspect of the tool
facilitates the disentanglement of racial and cultural influences by highlighting the separateness
and relatedness of race and culture.
The conceptual view of race denoted in figure 1 depicts race as a social construction (Hilliard, 2001) (see NARST paper on CD for more information on race). In situating race as a social construct, physical characteristics, like skin color, are assigned meanings and value within the socio-political in service to socio-political aims (Banks, 1995), hence, the placement of race as the overlap between socially defined biological markers and the socio-political.

In regards to culture, numerous conceptualizations of culture exist (see NARST paper on CD for more information on culture). In the literature, these definitions of culture are often positioned as exclusionary. For example, Nasir and Hand (2006) speculated that the lack of overlap in two bodies of literature in their synthesis may be a result of how culture was operationalized. They argued that one tradition treated culture as a static system of beliefs and practices that individuals carried with them from one context to another while the other cast culture as dynamic sets of entities (e.g., beliefs, practices, values, worldviews, etc.) that are constructed, produced and reproduced in the act of living. In this tool, culture is a complex system of entities that become visible through their prevalent enactment within long-standing communities (e.g. existence for generations). Like the part of an iceberg that is above the water, some sites of the system are within the threshold of awareness and can be subordinated to human will in terms of change while others, like the part of the iceberg submerged beneath the water, are deep structures and processes (Boykin, 1994) that are not readily susceptible to alteration. In this tool, culture lies at the intersection of long-standing communities and the socio-political where culture is treated as invisible, deficient, different, or capital (Parsons et al, 2009).

As shown in figure 1, race and culture are connected by the socio-political. For example, communities segregated by race, the norm in the U.S., is a result of socio-political processes. As
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A consequence of their shared lived experiences, individuals that comprise these racially segregated communities may share similar beliefs, practices, worldviews, etc. (culture).

The representation for the distinctiveness and connectedness of race and culture can stand independently, but for the proposed presentation, the race-culture representation is contained in a more comprehensive conceptual framework that highlights contexts.

**Generative Conceptual Framework**

When system-wide challenges in education, especially those associated with underserved and marginalized racial and ethnic groups, are considered, these considerations often occur in a vacuum. Challenges are approached as though their existence is rooted in and the sole result of immediate circumstances of the here and now; the effects of their existence are typically viewed from the vantage of individuals as independent entities in exclusion to individuals as members of groups stratified in U.S. society with differential access to human, material, and symbolic resources. Individual and structural factors and micro (local) and macro (more global) structures and processes in a society in which power and resource differentials exist according to groups are not entertained (Nasir & Hand, 2006). To capture the aforementioned dynamics in a way that lends itself to wholistic as well as part-by-part examination, I appropriated constructs from Michael Cole’s (1996, 1998) cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) and Urie Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems as the second component of the tool (see figure 2).

The tool’s second component includes layers of immediate contexts in which individuals of interest directly participate (microsystems, mesosystems) and life-impacting contexts that are distant and in which individuals are not directly involved (exosystems, macrosystem). The mesosystem (meso), not shown in figure 2 but is a part of Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological
system, captures correspondences and tensions that exist among microsystems (micro). Patterns that exist at the level of a society and beliefs and ideologies that underpin these consistencies constitute the macrosystem (macro). Although the reference point for the layers of contexts is typically the individual, the contexts are situated within a time domain, cultural-historical, that positions the individual as a member of a larger group. The cultural-historical, the domain in which race and culture originally emerged in the U.S., refers to the history of the cultural group in which an individual is born. Ontogeny and microgenesis, which are influenced by the cultural-historical, pertain to the history of an individual and moment-to-moment interactions encompassed in an individual’s experience, respectively. The tool’s second component enables one to identify and track the individual/structural and macro/micro influences on educational experiences in a manner that makes the connections explicit.

The Tool: Its Utility

As captured in observations, videotapes, and participant interviews conducted over a one-year period, an African American middle school science teacher’s instructional practices are viewed using the tool with special attention given to racial and cultural influences. The case and its deconstruction are described and discussed.

Synopsis of the Case

The case example involved Ms. Vince, a pseudonym for an African American middle school science teacher. Ms. Vince grew up in an African American community located in the eastern U.S. and was educated in the early years of her life in a Black elementary school under de jure segregation. Prior to entering 7th grade, the legal mandate to desegregate was implemented after which she attended desegregated schools from grade 7 to grade 12. After
graduation from high school, she attended a predominantly White institution (PWI) in the eastern U.S. and secured a B.S degree in science and health education and a M.S. in health planning and administration. At the time of the study, Ms. Vince had taught in the public schools for 20 years. The instructional practices featured in this example occurred during an eighth grade, six-week unit.

The six-week unit on animals and population dynamics began by subdividing the class into mixed-ability groups based upon their interest in animals (e.g., tree frogs, iguanas). The animals were housed in the classroom and were the subject of the students’ care and inquiries. Before the animals arrived, the students extensively researched the animals with special attention to specific questions that aligned with the state curriculum. After preliminary preparations, the students devised their own questions that were investigable under the resource constraints of the middle school classroom and the classroom community. For example, one group wanted to investigate any changes in behavior if the sleeping/waking patterns of a nocturnal animal were disrupted. Working outside and inside class, groups coordinated the care of the animals, designed and implemented experiments to address their questions, collected and analyzed data, drew conclusions based on evidence, and formally communicated their conclusions with others inside and outside their class community. The learning events which were designed to be too comprehensive for a lone individual to successfully complete within the six-week period required students to heavily depend upon each other and to devote any individual resources, within and across groups, to the attainment of the learning goal (i.e., answering questions of interest).
Deconstruction of Instructional Practice

There were many linkages (e.g., professional development and education reform across time) among Ms. Vince’s ontogeny (life history) as described by her, the varying levels of context in the second component of the tool, and the six-week learning event (microgenesis). In this presentation, I highlight the correspondences related to race and culture (figure 3).

Race: Cultural-Historical and the Macro to Ontogeny and the Micro

With respect to U.S. Blacks, racial oppression has existed since the establishment of the U.S. colonies. The ideology of Black inferiority underlies and perpetuates this racial oppression which has been enacted in many ways throughout U.S. history and present times. In her interviews, Ms. Vince iterated some of these manifestations: de jure segregation, desegregation, and racial discrimination/aggressions (see figure 4). Although racial oppressions originated in the cultural-historical (i.e., legislated racial segregation), Ms. Vince’s words illustrated the connections to and influence these oppressions had upon her life in the past and present (ontogeny).

Prior to 1954, the schooling of Blacks in separate facilities was legally mandated. Reflecting the notion that Blacks were of less worth than Whites, schools serving Blacks received fewer physical, human, material, and symbolic resources from federal, state, and local agencies in comparison to their White counterparts. Even in the face of such odds, scholars have documented the quality of educational experiences and strengths of Black schools during the de jure segregation era (Siddle-Walker, 1993, 2000). The decision of Brown vs. Board of Education rendered in 1954 declared de jure segregation unconstitutional. Subsequently, the process to
desegregate, which typically involved the closure of Black schools, began. The school Ms. Vince attended in the 1970s as a seventh grader was a part of the desegregation process.

Although Black students realized some gains from the *Brown* decision, several scholars in their critique of *Brown* emphasized what was lost. Ms. Vince extensively discussed two of the critiques, low expectations and racially discriminatory sorting (Siddle-Walker, 1993, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2004; Tate, 2001), when sharing about her life in the past and present.

When you have a child, they raise their hands and say ‘I don’t understand’, it’s like ‘that stupid’ …you know they don’t say it but they actually believe it because they don’t say ‘ok and come back with me after lunchtime or can you stay after school.’ You know you don’t find that. I definitely remember in segregated schools that the focus was on getting kids prepared to be in the mainstream and you had more of the teachers with the attitude of helping everybody…. And now that we’ve integrated, there’s not that community push to see the best and brightest come out.

It’s our [educators’] expectations …. And I do believe I fight the battle with people because once I see kids in here that are naturally interested in science research, then they come back to the real world and people are telling them, ‘oh you can’t endure the training.’ They’ll say ‘did you realize how long it’s going to take…to get that career?’ And that’s not what you should be saying. You should be saying ‘would you like to get…jobs to keep…’ I mean, because kids will endure whatever it takes if it’s something they really want to achieve. That’s basic human nature…. I even had that with my child. I had to detox my child because somebody was telling her, ‘Well, you can’t…’ I really find that a lot of people have set the systems up to turn kids off before they’re really turned on.

Ms. Vince further described systems established to “turn kids off before they’re really turned on.” She focused primarily on the sorting of students by teachers within classes and by district regulations across classes.

It’s like they [teachers] would put a test together that would fail the majority of the class and they thought that was a good indicator of their best and their brightest… I guess in real life their purpose was to make sure that they were the gate-keepers for a lot of professions. They would rather turn off a mass and keep a few. I would think that you want to pull most people with you. You don’t want to sink the masses and save a few.
I think it’s a level of discrimination that sets in simply because you have denied access to this kid who may be from the project who’s got a high IQ for math. And so in essence we’re still battling that….

Ms. Vince located her primary response to low expectations and sorting mechanisms in culture.

_Culture: Ontogeny to Microgenesis_

African American culture has been discussed as a remnant of African culture (Nobles, 1978), a variant of African culture that is incommensurate with the dominant U.S. one (Boykin, 1994), and a form of resistance to cultural hegemony in the U.S. (Ogbu, 1978). Nobles discussed a collective unity essential to the individual; Boykin, the valuing of the group’s needs over an individual’s privileges; and Ogbu posited a worldview that advancement in society is more likely through collective rather than individual efforts as one characteristic feature of African American culture. Ms. Vince iterated this view of collective effort when reminiscing about her desegregation experience as an adolescent (see figure 5): “I knew how it was when I went through 7th and 8th grade because they only would put a few of you in a class so I dealt with issues of isolation but we managed to support one another.” Ms. Vince called this idea of collective effort and support “community as family”, an orientation she ascribed to her immersion in African American communities: “… the majority of African Americans were brought up in communities where your community was your family. We included just about everybody in the tasks that had to get done.”

For the six-week learning event involving animals, Ms. Vince utilized the middle school students’ interests and affinity towards and for animals to establish community as family. Even though Ms. Vince was concerned about the science learning outcomes, the animals and their
well-being were the focal point for students. “Because a lot of them, once they start observing
the animals for their charts, they … don’t always stay science. It’s amazing to me how many
children have to humanize their animals. Fred has to become a pet with a pet name although
Fred is a tree frog.” For the greater good of taking care of their animals, the students did more
than work cooperatively together. The notion of community as family encompassed the uses of
students’ individual assets to uplift each other in pursuit of their defined goals.

When they did a lot with cooperative learning, I did not like the way they made the kids
share their points and that sort of thing, but I did like the fact that they made you aware
that you need tutors and mentors in a group together….If there’s somebody there who’s
completely lost, maybe that child can help…. And there are some cultural things that fall
into some of the dynamics that I see from different children when they really don’t want
to work in groups. I see that same tendency in some adults who just can’t get there.
They may have the greatest of abilities but they just cannot function, in learning to
cooperate with everyone in a group….individuals from different cultural classes have
different ways in which they interact with one another. And some of the things that you
actually see comes from those learned… social patterns that they’ve learned from their
beginning of life to their adulthood… And even in the cooperative groups that we saw
[referring to video clips of her teaching] we also saw that cultural difference coming out.
And they feel very intimidated to actually share their knowledge or to actually help
somebody…it’s because of the experiences, the culture that that student has come out of.

Summary: Race, Culture, Context, and Instructional Practice

The second component of the tool highlighted the links among race, culture, and Ms.
Vince’s hallmark orientation of community as family to instruction. The tool’s first component
facilitated the disentanglement of influences most directly related to race, physical characteristics
assigned meaning in service to socio-political aims, and influences most directly related to
culture, a multifaceted worldview that is intractable in some aspects but mallaeable in others. In
positioning what Ms. Vince shared about her life within the racial and cultural experiences of
African Americans as a collective, the origins of Ms. Vince’s practice of valuing group over
individual are implicated. The idea of community as family, one articulation of culture, originated in Ms. Vince’s early development and education in an all-Black community and all-Black elementary school, the outcome of legislated racial segregation. She then drew upon community as family when her African American peers and she were isolated in desegregated PWIs, grade seven through college. With respect to instructional practices as a teacher, the community as family orientation that emerged during her early development and refined in later years of her life was evident when she criticized some teachers’ quests to “sink the masses and save a few;” in her discussions about working cooperatively together; and in how she structured and facilitated learning in the middle school science classroom.

The Tool: Its Applicability and Significance

The socio-political of a society is the site in which the distribution and access to human, material, and symbolic resources are determined. Numerous U.S. statistics (e.g., educational, economic, etc.) regarding the distribution and access to these resources show inequalities and inequities by racial and ethnic groups. In policies, reforms, research, and practices these group differentials and their influences are not approached as group- and individual-impacting systems, with specific historical origins, imbued with structures to reproduce themselves from one generation to the next. This tool facilitates the systematic disentangling of race and culture within context such that connections between the historical and contemporary are explicit and actions can be tailored to influences related to race and influences related to culture. Even though the example to explicate the tool and to illustrate its analytic utility was delimited to race and culture in the U.S. in relation to one teacher’s instructional practice, stratifying constructs
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(e.g., gender, socio-economic class, etc.) that are relevant to other groups within other societies with respect to policies, reforms, research, and/or practice can be accommodated by the tool.

The tool is proposed as an analytical tool to enable the critical consideration of local processes, wider structural influences, individuals as isolates, and individuals as members of collectives when investigating educational phenomena within stratified societies.
Figure 1. Race and culture conceptualization
Figure 2. Appropriation of micro, exo, and macrosystem constructs from Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory and cultural-historical (racial and cultural group), ontogeny (history of individual or event) and microgenesis (experience) constructs from Cole’s (1996) cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT).
Figure 3. Situating the cultural-historical, ontogeny, and microgenesis for the African American middle school science teacher example
Figure 4: Race deconstruction in the African American middle school science teacher example
Figure 5: Culture deconstruction in the African American middle school science teacher example
References


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